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ABSTRACT

William D. Ruckelshaus, Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, presents in this paper the Alfred M. Landon Memorial Lecture at Kansas State University, April 12, 1972. Restoring man to a harmony with nature and his environment and insuring a clean and livable home for the posterity of all mankind are the goals we must strive for. The problems of our times are set forth--lack of faith and trust in the principles, institutions, and accomplishments which reflect a common tradition or shape a common purpose. The assumption of utopia is perhaps undergirding many cries for reform today and adding to the crises of confidence we as a nation are experiencing. To combat these situations, we must be realistic in our assessments and honest about the limits of human solutions to human problems. The emergence of environmental concern gives us a unique opportunity to prove we can create a society that is clean, safe, quiet and beautiful, yet also provide for man's legitimate material needs. True environmentalism teaches a new ethics and new reverence for life. It can help unify the American people and, if carried to fruition, will inspire new confidence in man's power to control his own destiny. (BL)

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The Crisis of Trust and The Environmental Movement

An Address by
William D. Ruckelshaus
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A careful student of man's activity over the past 6000 years can distinguish two different modes of adaptation to the physical world.

Certain civilizations have tried to conquer their environments. They achieved impressive initial successes but ultimately failed in part because their destructive habits undermined the biosystems on which their existence depended.

Others have melded so unobtrusively into the matrix of nature as to be neutral or even benign in their effects -- at least before the rise of population in the 20th century.

We in the West seem to have modeled our behavior on the more destructive cultures. In both Europe and the United States we have mined, farmed, deforested, littered, and urbanized everything in sight, with little thought to the limits of our resources or to the preservation of natural beauty. We have thus far postponed disaster but

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The Alfred M. Landon Memorial Lecture, Kansas State University, April 12, 1972

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we have not pre-empted it. Indeed, recent signs have persuaded many that the time has come for detoxification on a global scale.

The environmental movement which began three years ago far transcends the call for clean air, pure water, and more parks. For the first time in the developed nations of the world we are questioning the consequences of mindless demographic and economic growth.

We in America have begun the halting transition from a culture of action to a search for understanding, from an obsession with material things to an esteem of the good and the beautiful. All this is, of course, manifestly unconventional. One senses the beginning of a new historical era--an era predicted long ago by one of the founding fathers.

In a letter to his wife Abigail in 1792 John Adams wrote with remarkable prescience that "the mechanic arts are those which we have occasion for in a young country as yet simple and not far advanced in luxury. I must study politics and war, that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy, commerce and agriculture, natural history and naval architecture and navigation, in order to give their children the right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry and porcelain."

In a sense, he was setting priorities. America, Adams was saying, had first to guarantee its independence, then satisfy the developmental needs of our people and finally meet their intellectual and spiritual requirements. As Adams well knew, it was a task for more than three generations.

But let no one imagine that changing attitudes toward the total environment are the special property of this country. Unmistakable signs of a similar awakening have appeared in West Europe, in Japan, in the Soviet Union and even in some of the less developed countries despite their legitimate desire for the material comforts of a technological age. Pollution, over-population, ugliness and urban sprawl are not capitalist phenomena, nor is concern about them a monopoly of the affluent: they are the universal concomitants of a now vanishing ecological laissez-faire.

I believe that one of the most difficult tasks man faces in the remainder of this troubled century will be to see who can best manage the earth, who can best preserve this heritage we, the living, hold in sacred trust for all peoples and all generations.

Recently a study of man's environmental impact entitled The Limits to Growth drew widespread attention in this country and abroad. Essentially, it was a computer-based systems analysis of the fate of our civilization if we do not move swiftly to redress the imbalances caused by growing energy demand, production, and population. Whatever the merits of such a projection, it does not address the most pressing problem we face as a society, a problem worthy of a shelffull of studies itself, volumes we might call The Limits of Belief.

For we live in an age when it is far easier to define those things in which we no longer believe and no longer repose trust than it is to recite a litany of the principles, the institutions and the accomplishments which reflect a common tradition or shape a common purpose.

When faith is shaken and tradition becomes suspect in a nation it can reflect a temporary cynicism -- a fleeting aberration -- or a fundamental crumbling of the ethical underpinnings necessary to the continued life of a society.

In a recent column Smith Hempstone of the Washington Star addressed this problem:

> "Morality, like faith, he wrote, is a delicate plant which can flourish only when it is passed down from generation to generation among

> familiar landmarks which testify to the cadenced rhythm and immemorial permanence of things. When ancestral graves are no longer tended and the sayings of old men cease to be thought wise, the disposition to look beyond one's immediate and apparent advantage becomes slight."

The limits of belief may already have been reached. In the last 16 months I have traveled all over this country and one thing has struck me more than any other. Mistrust of our basic institutions is almost rampant. It extends to business, to government at all levels, educational institutions, the professions -- from lawyers to TV repairmen--and even to the churches.

Perhaps this near epidemic of skepticism has been induced by a decade in which government has consistently bit off more than it could chew, has consistently over promised and underperformed. As a society we have tackled all kinds of social problems with great energy and expenditures but have little to show for our well-meaning efforts.

If we have learned anything by now it should be to appreciate the intractability of social issues, to be realistic in our assessments and honest about the limits of human solutions to human problems. Nowhere is this

more critical than in the environment, for renovating our ravaged earth is not going to be quick or easy or cheap.

Yet what our society badly needs are some successes, the renewal of a belief that we are capable of coping with our own complexities. I believe that with the environment we have a chance for such successes. It won't happen overnight and it won't be easy. But we can make progress -- progress that can be seen by every American in cleaner air, purer water and beautification of our neglected earth. If such successes were to be achieved, and I'm convinced that they can and will, it might rekindle hope in Americans, renew our vigor to grapple with other social problems whose solution has defied us -- problems of race, poverty, urban decay and even war.

The main task of those committed to a better life is to be rigorous and yet sensible, determined to aim high yet refusing to fall for simple solutions that are bound to disappoint in the longrun. We cannot return to an idyll of pastoral perfection; we have to adapt our reforms to the reality of the society we have created.

The surest way to alienate potential allies and destroy the effort to restore the environment is to link it with radical proposals unrelated to what we are trying to achieve.

For instance, some sensible approach to population control is necessary, but we needn't stop procreating. Mindless economic growth cannot continue, but to bring the economy to a crashing halt is to eliminate support for anything we want to undertake -- including environmental restoration. Technology cannot continue to run amok, but new technology is needed to produce clean energy and indeed to clean up the environment.

What we need at this point in the environmental movement is a good dose of old-fashioned Kansas common sense, the kind which the man for whom this lectureship is named represents. A third of a century ago, he observed:

> If a tornado"rips the roof off a house... we don't tear down the walls and abandon the whole structure... We put on a new and better roof, strengthening those parts discovered to be weak."

The question, therefore, is not whether there shall be growth--there will always be growth of one kind or another as long as man struggles to perfect himself. The

question is how to define it, how to plan for it, how to limit its deleterious consequences over the span of decades and centuries.

Indeed, the emergence of environmental concern gives us a unique opportunity to prove that we can create a society that is clean, safe, quiet and beautiful, and yet also provides man's legitimate material needs.

We certainly came to this sophistication at a very late hour. I think it must be conceded by any fair-minded person that until recently our anti-pollution laws were not really taken seriously. The early water laws of the 1880's and 90's were not enforced; the newer air and water laws in the 1950's and 60's were weak but not as weak as the will to use them. We got nowhere. There was reason for distrust, even disillusionment. But today we are in motion. Much has been achieved in the last two years.

In the 16 short months since the creation by the President of the Environmental Protection Agency, we have announced national ambient air quality standards to protect the public health and the environment. Under the Clean Air Act of 1970 these standards must be met in a strict time frame. We have initiated the same sort of program in water pollution through a national permit program that will put each industrial discharger in this country on a schedule

of abatement to protect the waters receiving their effluent. In other words, we have been laying a foundation for solid progress. The result of these efforts will be appreciably cleaner air and water in the next 3 or 4 years. It won't restore the conditions of 1492 or 1620 or even 1776, but it will be an unprecedented achievement.

Maybe the crisis of confidence we as a nation are experiencing today lies in an assumption undergirding many cries for reform. That assumption is utopianism, the belief that man is capable of perfecting himself and his society.

In my view the danger of this assumption when applied to politics is that if you really believe you can make everything perfect you are likely to adopt rather drastic kinds of solutions to achieve social goals. If these solutions fail they inevitably lead to even more extreme positions and ultimately to some form of authoritarianism. We can read this lesson in the grim annals of the French and Russian revolutions.

The threat of an authoritarian society may seem remote and indeed it probably is. But there are other, more immediate shoals on the voyage to utopia.

First we lose our ability to measure progress. If it is possible to achieve absolute equality of opportunity, to abolish prejudice forever or to attain perfect love or total

freedom, or absolutely pure water and air, then any approximation of these ideals must fall short. Progress cannot be measured then by the way in which man always advances--one step at a time--but rather in terms of failure to achieve the ultimate--the utopia. In that sense man will always fail, will always despair.

Second, in believing we can achieve perfection we insure that some will cop out, will give up, will quit the field of moral struggle when disappointment sets in--as it always does.

Nobody ever revealed the human condition better than David Lilienthal, when he said:

> "The short and sure road to despair and surrender is this: to believe that there is, somewhere, a scheme of things that will eliminate conflict, struggle, stupidity, cupidity, personal jealousy. The idea of utopia is mischievous, as well as unrealistic and dull, to boot. Man is born pushing and shoving as the sparks fly upward."

But the blind idealist doesn't see things that way. If utopia is reachable, and it has not been attained, then someone must be to blame. This is the inevitable third shoal of the utopian voyage: scapegoating.

For many the problem is not simplistic populism or rampant perfectionism or imperfect, struggling homo sapiens, it is conniving politicians or vested interests or black panthers or police brutality or bourgeois compromisers or Communists or that hoary old bugaboo, the military-industrial complex.

The belief in man's ability to perfect his home--his only planet--is a logical but dangerous extension of our penchant for utopian thinking. If we believe that the environment can be totally restored--whatever that means--how do we measure progress? Do we restore it to its condition 50 or 100 or 1,000 years ago--or earlier? Even if we could agree on environmental perfection and what the good life consists of, still we are bound to fall short of that goal and to despair. And then the search will begin again--who did it to us? All this does not mean that we don't try. That we don't recognize we have raped our air, land and water and we must pay the price to restore the defiled. Striving--"pushing and shoving as the sparks fly upward" is man's greatest challenge. Not to try is to admit defeat or deny the existence of the problem. But try, knowing our efforts will not be wholly successful and try knowing that real fulfillment is in the trying itself.

I believe profoundly that earth renovation is tantamount to self renovation, the key not only to a clean and orderly society, but to greater human happiness as well. I envision a time when the majority of our people will regard it as an essential aspect of good citizenship to incorporate the precepts of environmentalism into their daily lives.

But to be effective practical ecologists the American people must understand the complexities and the costs vs. the benefits of every contemplated action.

Many of you in this audience must participate in the grass-roots formation of public opinion and citizen action on these vital matters.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once said that a man is required to take part in the great causes of his time or be judged not to have lived. That was never more true than today. What awaits us is a world of unparalleled danger and therefore of unequalled opportunity.

It is not a time which can give much comfort to the smug or the fainthearted, but it must surely stir the minds and souls of those who reject the sedentary life. We must question some of the most hallowed notions of our culture--concepts of family size, energy use, waste, success,

technology and uncontrolled growth which constitute the very foundation and thrust of America these last 200 years.

The evidence is overwhelming that industrial civilization will change dramatically within our lifetimes if it is to sustain a high level of culture for centuries to come.

We must build a world where human beings count for more than machines.

This, then, is the true meaning of environmentalism in our time. It teaches a new ethics and a new reverence for life. It can help to unify the American people. And if carried to fruition, it will inspire new confidence in man's power to control his own destiny.

There is one more bit of wisdom which I have learned from Alf Landon I'd like to share with you this morning. In times as difficult and trying as these, he said nearly three decades ago, "We are aware that we must make our just contribution to the solution of the problems of the times. Each generation in turn has its own problems to solve for posterity. No age has escaped this inspiring responsibility."

It is for your generation and mine in the years and decades to come to restore man to a harmony with nature and his environment, to insure a clean and livable home for the posterity of all mankind.

When this Administration took office more than 3 years ago, the President urged us all to lower our voices, but let us never lower our vision. We must be a generation of idealists without illusions, which seeks painstakingly, often one step at a time, to fulfill the dreams which have inspired good men in all ages. There is no utopia, there is no rediscovering Eden on Earth, but there is, for each of us, a beckoning vision: man at peace with himself, his neighbor, his world.